

# “How Could Anyone Respect Us?” A Century of Olympic Consciousness and National Anxiety in China

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“China has never produced an earthshaking scientist or author or explorer ... not even a talented athlete for the Olympics! When you think about it, how could anyone respect us?”

– Novelist Lao She, *Ma and Son* (1935)<sup>1</sup>

MUCH OF THE HISTORY OF China's modern sports and physical culture program (*tiyu*) has been phrased, experienced, understood, and remembered as a gesture of national defense. Enemies have come, gone, and come again—the Western and Japanese imperialists, the Communists, the Nationalists, the footbound and weak, the ignorant and unhygienic, the decadent and materialistic, Taiwan, Falun Gong, and (again) U.S. and Japanese imperialists. All have served as forces that threatened China's national body and had to be defeated with the rhythms, motions, disciplines, and ideologies of modern sport. Thus, over the last century, sport in China has served as a marker of political and social power, but it has also represented a profound national anxiety. This article investigates this realm and the tension between power and anxiety, and strength and fear, that has characterized so many of China's political movements over its many governmental transitions since the fall of the Qing Dynasty.

## SPORT AND NATIONAL HUMILIATION

From the earliest moments of the Republic of China period (1912–1949), all types of physical culture exhibited an affinity with a defensive nationalism. The first high-profile example of anti-imperialism and nationalism through Chinese sport came in the 1915

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Second Far Eastern Games, held in Shanghai just days after President Yuan Shikai had acceded to the Twenty-One Demands—Japan’s wartime attempt to vault to the forefront of imperialists exploiting China’s markets and environment. Hoping to save some measure of prestige, Yuan personally paid to bring the standout Honolulu Chinese baseball team to represent the motherland in the games.<sup>2</sup> This was a clear violation of the games’ rules on territorial representation and use of professional players, so the team never played. But the players’ presence in Shanghai (they had won eight consecutive games there against U.S. teams in preparation) clearly provided an inspiring taste of pan-Chinese nationalism for athletes and fans alike.

The 100,000 fans who attended the weeklong games had much to cheer about, seeming to forget regional and political differences for the sake of the nation. As the YMCA national physical director wrote, “For the first time men from the north, south, east, and west stood together and cheered for China, and it mattered not whether an athlete was from north, south, east, or west. So long as he had the five-barred ribbon [the national flag] on, they cheered him.”<sup>3</sup> And when the “Chinese” soccer team (composed of only Hong Kong players) defeated the Filipino team, the Shanghai crowd surged forward to carry their victorious “countrymen” off the field atop their shoulders.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Herzfeld, in his book *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, argues that embarrassment and failure can actually reveal a society’s most intimate shared beliefs. The key, in his words, is to locate the “source of external embarrassment . . . that nevertheless provide[s] insiders with their assurance of common sociality.”<sup>5</sup> Sport, with its quasi-martial qualities, became a logical and powerful site within which nationalistic Chinese could address and hopefully avenge the “national humiliations” (*guochi*) that they had all suffered together. In 1922, Xi’an’s new sports grounds featured “a map of national humiliations, with big lettering to explain each one . . . as China has been carved up so many times.”<sup>6</sup> Paul Cohen has shown how, in the early-Republican culture of “national humiliation” observations, remembering was seen as a modern act opposed to the “traditional” passive Chinese practice of forgetting these humiliations.<sup>7</sup> Physical culture—and its self-conscious commitment to action and teamwork—no doubt seemed the perfect modern way to relive and resolve the problems of China’s national weakness.

## THE EMERGENCE OF SPORTING NATIONALISM

The 1920s were the time when much of this sporting nationalism emerged—often, though not always—from the left. In 1923, the Socialist Youth League of China called for the “Sinicization” of physical education and sports,<sup>8</sup> and the Socialist Youth Brigade’s mouthpiece *The Pioneer* condemned capitalist and Western sport for “eating

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away at [sporting proletarians'] class consciousness and their courage to carry on class struggle."<sup>9</sup> The capitalist trappings that dominated modern sport provided the perfect means for an attack on sport as problematic, even if ultimately useful to the Chinese people and nation.

This question of *how* one should engage in modern sport and physical culture has gripped many Chinese ever since this moment. During the 1930s, Chinese politicians and thinkers of all stripes brought up the question of a "national game." Chen Lifu, the University of Pittsburgh-educated confidante of Chiang Kai-shek, described the importance of a national sport in uniting, strengthening, and determining the rise of Greece, the United States, Britain, and Japan.<sup>10</sup>

Physical education expert Wu Cheng, taking a similar view, suggested swimming as China's national sport. Most sports were "foreign goods," wrote Wu, but swimming hailed from ancient China. And with all of China's rivers, there would be no need to build "aristocratized, Westernized" pools or other equipment to build the courage of the Chinese people.<sup>11</sup>

The question was resolved in 1935 when Shanghai's *Chin Fen Sports Monthly* announced a contest open to all subscribers submitting essays on the question, "Which type of game or sport should our nation take as its national pastime?"<sup>12</sup> Five months later, the contest results were announced: soccer and basketball were named Chinese national co-pastimes. Other reader submissions comprised not quite national but valuable pastimes such as martial arts, volleyball, swimming, shuttlecock, gymnastics, boxing, and ping-pong; also included were labor and footraces in full military gear.<sup>13</sup> It is instructive to see how these different readers and contributors imagined these physical activities—all but a couple foreign in origin—truly and finally cultivating solidarity in the Chinese people as they had done in the imperialist nations to whom they wanted to catch up.

But for many in the Chinese sporting world, the litany of bourgeois sports named above could never do the trick. A cadre of experts influenced by fascist physical culture in Germany and Japan emerged in the early 1930s to challenge the liberal Anglo-American near-monopoly on the field. These scholars made clear associations between the recent industrial and national successes of the German, Japanese, and Italian nation-races and their success in tuning militarized physical education programs to unique racial qualities summoned up from their national pasts. In 1935, Sichuan Province Physical Culture Inspector Liu Shenzhan proclaimed, "New physical culturists must create a single unified body of the Chinese citizenry, where each element of this body

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understands the same goals—of saving the nation and revitalizing the nation-race—in their hearts and minds.”<sup>14</sup>

The leader of this school, the German-educated Cheng Dengke, wrote, “In the circumstances shared by China and Germany, who have both been oppressed by the powers and their treaties, and whose economies are in straitened conditions, we especially know the importance of elementary school physical education.”<sup>15</sup> The Nazis disgusted many

**The Nazis disgusted many Chinese with their racial supremacism and their reign of terror inside and outside Germany.** Chinese with their racial supremacism and their reign of terror inside and outside Germany. However, the dozens of articles published in China on German physical culture by German-educated tiyu planners like Cheng still allowed this model to achieve great currency throughout the Chinese tiyu community.

Japan’s model was another very appealing one, even if it was the Japanese enemy against whom strong Chinese bodies would have to defend their nation. Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomintang or KMT) bigwig and sporting expert Chu Minyi explained in 1929 how Japan’s strength as a nation was due to its *bushido* tradition and the spirit of the “Yamato soul”—preconditions for national strength that were within China’s reach since it shared so many traditions with Japan.<sup>16</sup>

However, not every Chinese physical educator was so enthralled with Japan. Anhui Elementary School tiyu instructor Yu Zizhen in 1932 wrote in *Sports Weekly* with an “Anti-Japan Expressive Calisthenics” performed to the song “Stab at Japan,” the first verse of which went:

Comrades, take your guns and swords,  
Prepare them well, prepare them well.  
Stab at Japan, stab at Japan,  
Thrash and destroy the den of the dwarf slaves.  
Capture the Japanese, get them alive,  
And kill the thieves down to the last dog.  
Don’t fear the dwarf slaves, as proud and arrogant as they may be.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, some cared more about Japan’s imperialist aggression against their republic than about some fellow-Asian national essence that could be bottled and used to strengthen the Chinese polity.

## CHINA’S EARLY OLYMPIC FAILURES

China made its inaugural Olympic appearance in the 1932 games in Los Angeles. By this, their tenth incarnation, the modern Olympics had become a powerful symbol of national strength, accomplishment, and the will to participate in the international

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community that games founder Pierre de Coubertin called the "republic of muscles."<sup>18</sup> The official decision to join the Olympic Games represented the ultimate test of an ambitious, if self-doubting, Chinese sporting community. All knew that the very Chinese nation, its race and its people, would be coming under close and lasting examination on the playing fields of Los Angeles.

China's entry into this grand company of nations was made by a single pioneer venturing west: a 22-year-old fruit picker's son, sprinter Liu Changchun. Liu and his coach Song Junfu arrived in Los Angeles on 29 July 1932—just one day before the games were scheduled to begin—representing the entire Republic of China. They were greeted by dozens of Chinese-Californians excited by this show of Chinese Olympic skill.

Despite sparkling starts in his two races, the 100- and 200-meter sprint heats, Liu placed fifth and fourth respectively, and was quickly eliminated from competition in both events.<sup>19</sup> But Liu's diary shows the importance he and so many others placed on his participation:

Everywhere I go [the Americans] make me feel as though they really do sympathize with China. . . . They don't say anything explicitly, but . . . it's in the sound of their voice when they say, "Japan . . ." with a bitter laugh. As far as I can tell, almost every nation sympathizes with us. . . . Have even I made some contribution?!

A much larger team was sent to the 1936 Olympics, as 55 athletes—China's finest track and field athletes, basketball and soccer players, weightlifters, boxers, cyclists, and even martial artists (for a *guoshu* demonstration in Berlin)—traveled aboard the Italian *Conte Verde* for 25 days to arrive in Europe. Each stop in Southeast Asia brought fabulous welcomes from the Chinese populations there, and allowed the Olympic enterprise to also serve as a tool of a transnational "Greater China" ethnic pride. The team's arrival in Berlin was a memorable one for all involved. Arriving in the Olympic host city on 23 July, the team was greeted by 300 Chinese residents and students, all chanting, "Long live the Republic of China," and waving Chinese flags that local restaurants had sold before the team arrived.

Some Chinese observers were critical of the Olympic project, calling the government vain to spend 170,000 yuan (US\$51,300) to send "some athletes who will suffice . . . just so that the [R.O.C.] flag can flap above the Berlin Olympic Stadium."<sup>21</sup> But the Olympic delegation leader rebuffed this critique, asking the Chinese sports world to abandon simple economics for the symbolic grandeur of the Olympics: "The achievement of international recognition alone is worth millions to us as a nation. . . . I believe [the athletes] have accomplished more for China than several ambassadors could achieve in years."<sup>22</sup> For many, the Olympians' arrival itself in Berlin was a de facto Chinese triumph.

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However, a theme of failure dominated the post-Olympics evaluations delivered by members of the Chinese sporting community, who just wanted to finally win something. Former supporters of the Chinese team turned on the athletes, writing, “How badly they have failed, all the world knows.”<sup>23</sup> One point on which almost all seemed to be in agreement was the idea that the still-sickly, weak Chinese body was truly to blame. Head Olympic delegate Shen Siliang, upon returning to Shanghai, simply remarked, “[Chinese] physiques are underdeveloped, and just not fit enough to compete with others.” Seven years later, one prominent eugenicist still cried that this Olympic failure proved the Chinese national body to be a “weary, humpbacked cripple.”<sup>24</sup>

The standard for comparison was clearly the hated Japanese. Even before the Olympics began, one author, praising “the success of our Eastern neighbors,” had warned the sporting public, “There are no Chinese among the heroes atop the international athletic stage!”<sup>25</sup> After Japan won 18 medals at Berlin, eighth-most overall, Chinese sports enthusiasts were in awe. One author wondered, “Their physique is no better than ours; they are usually shorter in height. There are 101 things that can be said to be similar between [us]. Why are they so far ahead of us?”<sup>26</sup>

The Republic of China sent one more squad to the 1948 Summer Olympics in London. It is a tribute to the resilience of the Nationalist sporting community that after so much destruction in the war with Japan and the subsequent Nationalist–Communist civil war, many individuals still had such high hopes for these games.<sup>27</sup>

One bright spot for the R.O.C. delegation was the basketball team, which finished with a 5–3 record and set an Olympic record by walloping the Iraqi team, 125–25.<sup>28</sup> However, overall, London was one final “disastrous failure” for Chiang Kai-shek’s regime, having again finished the games with no medals.<sup>29</sup> More humiliating, however, was the fiasco that took place after the games, when Olympic officials realized that they did not have enough money to pay for the delegation’s return plane tickets. The team was reduced to selling their leftover food and asking for small donations from British well-wishers before they could purchase the tickets and bring to an end yet another Olympic misadventure.<sup>30</sup>

## COMMUNIST CHINA AND SPORT

The People’s Republic of China sporting era began on 22 October 1949, just three weeks after the dramatic founding of the new state, when a great Beijing Municipal Athletic Meet attracted over 30,000 participants and spectators.<sup>31</sup> The 1950s importation of Soviet models of training, bureaucracy, and socialist education, combined with the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) unprecedented reach into local life, allowed the P.R.C. sporting project to take Chinese sport to breadths, lengths, and depths

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never reached during the Republican era. Yet great continuity still existed between Nationalist and Communist conceptions of physical culture. The connections between the modern, competitive nation-state (itself a recent historical invention whose logic few questioned) and a healthy, self-disciplining populace was not one that the CCP sought to change.

The ruling CCP cultivated an extensive rhetoric of "red sports"—that is to say, uniquely "communist" forms and ideologies of sporting participation and propagation—which still are given credence by some today.<sup>32</sup> However, few modern sporting principles actually ever came under serious interrogation by the new masters of China.

Official 1950s programs in the martial arts and the "Ready for Labor and Defense of the Motherland Physical Culture System" could only have made the old 1930s-era KMT advocates proud.<sup>33</sup> But the Olympic Games for the P.R.C., like the R.O.C.

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before it, quickly became the new measure of national worth. Nationalist–Communist fighting on the mainland had hardly ceased when the war turned to this other vitally important battleground. Beginning in 1951, two Chinese Olympic Committees—one representing the Taipei Nationalist regime and encouraged by IOC Chairman Avery Brundage, the other representing Beijing and aided by the Soviet Union—began making their respective cases for their exclusive right to represent "China" at the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games.<sup>34</sup>

The IOC, long before formulating their "Olympic model," ruled in July 1952 to allow both Chinese teams to join the Games (although in 1981 the committee recognized the Republic of China only as "Chinese Taipei," or *Zhonghua Taipei*).<sup>35</sup> R.O.C. representative Hao Gengsheng declared that his athletes would never compete in the same arena as Chinese Communist athletes, and announced the R.O.C.'s withdrawal from the 1952 Olympics. The coast was now clear for the P.R.C. delegation. Although the P.R.C. team left Beijing six days after the games had begun in Helsinki, Premier Zhou Enlai dismissed any who would quibble over such minor details, declaring, "Raising the five-starred red [P.R.C.] flag at the Olympic Games is in itself the victory." The P.R.C. flag was raised, and one Chinese male swimmer was able to join a backstroke preliminary race before the games ended.<sup>36</sup> This small victory preserved intact one of the very bases of the modern Chinese sporting project, where inclusion in the sporting rituals of the world community is understood as a fundamental victory for a Chinese nation finally reaching modernity.

The P.R.C.–R.O.C. battle for Chinese sporting legitimacy continued for the better part of three decades. At the 1956 Melbourne Olympiad, which the R.O.C. joined



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and the P.R.C. boycotted, an agent working for the P.R.C. pulled off a switch in the Olympic Village flags department. The intended result, the raising of the P.R.C.'s red flag upon the R.O.C. ("Formosa China") delegation's arrival, stunned and shocked the free sporting world.<sup>37</sup>

During the 1960 Olympics in Rome, the P.R.C.—counting on the IOC's co-operation—kept their hands off the flags. At the last moment, the IOC informed the Taiwan delegation that they could not compete as the "Republic of China," but rather as "Taiwan." Not knowing, of course, that four decades later this would be many Taiwanese citizens' most fervent wish, the R.O.C. team participated in the games under protest.<sup>38</sup> Four years later at the Tokyo Games, however, it was back to skullduggery for the P.R.C., whose intelligence agents enticed two traitorous teammates of legendary Taiwanese decathlete C. K. Yang to drug him before the decathlon. The two athletes, Ma Jingshan and Chen Jue, earned the right to defect back to their beloved mainland by spiking Yang's orange juice just days before the competition, and thus preventing Yang, the world-record holder at the time and *Sports Illustrated's* reigning "World's Best Athlete," from embarrassing the Communist regime with a sure gold-medal effort.<sup>39</sup>

The Cultural Revolution provided an interregnum from this zero-sum understanding of sport; U.S. ping-pong players visiting China in 1971 were famously stymied by the way the Chinese players would lose points on purpose for reasons of "friendship" and "diplomacy." The idea of worrying about "victory" in a ballgame was altogether too petty and bourgeois for participants in Mao's massive remaking of Chinese culture. But this odd take on Maoist internationalism disappeared quickly with the coming of the Deng Xiaoping reform era and a return to (at least some) principles of free markets and fair competition that had always formed the ideological basis of modern sport. Anthropologist Susan Brownell's *Training the Body for China* includes a wonderful description of the mania that greeted the P.R.C. women's volleyball team's victory in the 1981 World Cup. The university student who wrote to the team, swearing that their victory over Japan had allowed him for the first time to feel "the honor of being human," was professing a notion that, while surely sincere, was hardly original: he was simply the latest among many to imagine a defeat, sporting or otherwise, of Japan as perhaps the most gratifying nationalist gesture possible.<sup>40</sup>

#### CONTEMPORARY CHINA AND SPORT

The contemporary period offers several examples of how deeply the defensive notion of national pride remains at the heart of Chinese sport. The professional Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) is one example. A common concern of fans writing in to the official magazine *Basketball* relates to the appropriate level of "Chineseness" maintained by the



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CBA—for example, asking why all the CBA players wear “foreign” shoe brands instead of supporting Chinese companies, or suggesting that Chinese characters be used to stencil players’ names on the backs of their jerseys instead of romanized *pinyin* like “Z. Z. Wang” or “X. B. Gong.”<sup>41</sup>

But the most significant subject of nationalist basketball discourse relates to the recruitment of foreign players to supplement CBA rosters. In the 1990s, each team was allowed two foreign players, and Americans occupied the overwhelming majority of these slots. Members of the basketball bureaucracy seemed to take a very ambivalent stand on the role of the CBA’s foreign players. In one lead article of *Basketball*, titled “To Fire Up the Basketball Market, We Need More Foreign Players,” the author told of the foreigners’ contributions and reminded readers that the U.S. National Basketball Association (NBA) itself employed many foreign players.<sup>42</sup>

But many fans do not buy this line. In one fan forum, subscribers protested these Americans’ presence, holding that “second- and third-rate European and American players” could not truly help the development of Chinese basketball since they were only in the CBA to “sell tricks” and make money, and that they were not worth the disruption.<sup>43</sup> One fan was even more dramatic, stating that “[this] is Chinese basketball. Those winning glory for the nation in international competition are the men of China, not these ‘Eight-Nation Allied Forces’ [the foreign armies that invaded the Qing Dynasty in 1900].”<sup>44</sup>

The tensions present in this nationalist narrative finally came to a head at the CBA All-Star Game in Shenyang in April 1998, a contest that for the first time used an ill-advised “Chinese vs. Foreigner” format. The Foreign All-Stars won 83–80 on a last-second three-point shot by Ray Kelly of the Sichuan Blue Sword Beer Pandas, but the victorious side was quickly showered with cans and bottles, a barrage so heavy and prolonged that the state-operated CCTV was forced to cut off its broadcast.<sup>45</sup>

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The last few years, obviously, have offered precious relief to this community of nationalistic and frustrated basketball fans. After unsatisfying NBA encounters on the part of P.R.C. basketball stars Ma Jian, Wang Zhizhi, and Mengke Bateer, the career of Hosuton Rockets star center Yao Ming has been experienced in China as an epic achievement. Yao’s fame and excellent play has provided the perfect sort of trans-Pacific “conquest” to satisfy those in China who still make direct associations between the world of elite sports and national “strength.”

Yao’s game and persona seems to blend perfectly the glamour of the star-centered NBA and the fundamentals of passing and defensive skills that speak more to the no-

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tion of true teamwork, thus transcending race, culture, or even nation. And Yao also is clearly lucky to emerge at this historical moment; China's market-based economic reforms have created a society where the concept of the individual is no longer politically or socially problematic.<sup>46</sup>

And Yao has been joined even more recently among the ranks of NBA stars by Yi Jianlian of the Milwaukee Bucks. Yi's ascent has been rougher than Yao's; even before the unbecoming flap made by Yi's parents, who wanted him to play in a more Asian city than Milwaukee, he has been trailed for years by damning evidence that his age was falsified for years by P.R.C. sports authorities.<sup>47</sup> Yao Ming has set the bar high; it is notable how obvious it seems to most Chinese that Yi will only further Yao's work to win "respect" for the people of China.

The Asian Cup soccer competition, held in Beijing in 2004, saw another example of the bitter and defensive nationalism cited above. Fans came to Workers' Stadium for the Cup final, which pitted Japan against the host side, prepared for much more than a soccer game. The Japanese national anthem was drowned out by boos, and bottles and debris were thrown at the Japanese side. But more instructive were the many banners displaying numbers and slogans such as "300,000" (the number of people that official P.R.C. history says were massacred by Japanese imperial forces at Nanjing in 1937 to 1938), or a more revealing "This time, the Chinese people get to be the bullies." Similar songs and chants swept through the crowd, like "Kill! Kill! Kill!" or "May a big sword chop off the Japanese heads!"<sup>48</sup>

After Japan defeated China's national team, things got really ugly. Riot police clad in body armor and carrying shotguns came face to face with hundreds of patriotic Chinese fans throwing bottles, burning Japanese flags, and shouting obscenities. A car

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carrying a Japanese embassy minister was hit and its window smashed, and at least two foreign photographers covering the scenes were roughed up by the police themselves.<sup>49</sup> Although the Beijing police apologized to the Japanese embassy, it is clear that this was behavior that closely followed official scripts for cathartic nationalism that can be summoned up and extinguished very strategically by the present government.

Even baseball, a sport with very little history in China, can become part of this aggressive and expansive nationalism. Taiwanese fans of New York Yankees pitcher Wang Chien-ming, a native of Taiwan, were shocked in 2006 when Chinese sports pages like the *Oriental Sports Daily* began referring to Wang as a "Chinese pitcher." Headlines in Taiwan claimed that "China was trying to steal our glory and bask in our light"—a reference to Wang's near-official title of "The Light of Taiwan."<sup>50</sup> But once again, the

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ease with which the People’s Republic’s boldest and most desperate territorial claims are accommodated perfectly by the Chinese sporting world is instructive of the link between sports and Chinese nationalism.

## THE 2008 BEIJING OLYMPICS

This, of course, brings us to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Today, the medals won and records set by Chinese athletes in the games and other international competitions are understood as unquestionable proof of China’s superpower status in the world. The Republican-era goose eggs earned by the Chinese delegations to the 1932, 1936, and 1948 Olympic Games have become a dead-on caricature of the inadequacies and weakness of “Old China” and its agonies and defeats suffered at the hands of the powerful imperialist nations of the world—who, not coincidentally, no longer dare to perpetrate these aggressions on the citizens of New China. The twenty first-century China, fiercely nationalistic and proudly materialistic, now scorns those pre-1949 sporting misfortunes. Clearly, might is as right as weakness and defeat are laughable and pathetic.

Weak and backward nations do not host the Olympic Games—witness the epochal qualities attributed to the 1964 Olympic moment in standard narratives of Japan’s postwar redevelopment. Beijing 2008 will likely take on similar significance in the narratives of the reform era. Gallup China, itself an artifact of these very same reformist trends, in fact found that

Among those questioned, elderly residents showed the strongest desire to see Beijing win the bid, hoping they could see the Games come to their city before they died. Some people said they would exercise and build up their bodies in order to live until the day when the Games are staged in Beijing.<sup>51</sup>

Other polls show that 96 to 97 percent of the public supports the Olympic Games, although the forms of behavior that illustrate a lack of support for the games could take are not outlined. But this near-unanimity and enthusiasm is probably much greater than the official pothole-fixing impulse often cited in justifying the Olympic bid: commitment to important issues such as improved human rights standards, higher living standards, environmental progress, cleaner air, faster infrastructure development, new communications and sewage treatment facilities, unification with Taiwan, and cleaner public toilets.

The original official English-language motto of the 2008 games was “New Beijing, Great Olympics.” It happened not to correspond with the Chinese motto that accompanied it—“*xin Beijing, xin Aoyun*,” or “New Beijing, *New Olympics*”—an ambition (which seems closer to the 97 percent approval variety) that China could in fact *remake*

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the Olympic tradition that has seldom asked for Chinese approval. Perhaps because of the quickly-revealed gap between the Chinese and English texts, the official motto was changed later to “One World, One Dream”—an even more ambitious project. Both describe the outward-looking, proudly nationalist image of a central world role for China that the optimistic, upwardly mobile urban population—as well as the elites—would like to project.

But, given China’s consistent support for the murderous Janjaweed militia in Darfur, this Olympic gathering could also go down in history (if Mia Farrow, the *Wall Street Journal*, and others have their way) as the “Genocide Games.”<sup>52</sup> The ideological pretense of the Olympic movement clearly provides convenient sites for bitter protest; the “Free Tibet” campaign has circulated a clever “Gold Medal for Oppression” logo of five interlocking wreaths of barbed wire.<sup>53</sup> Six months before the games begin, the *New York Times* reported China’s arrest of yet another “online dissident,” Hu Jia, for his indirect involvement in a “We Want Human Rights, Not The Olympics” campaign in Heilongjiang.<sup>54</sup> The very real tension between the contradictory goals of openness and cosmopolitanism on one hand, and official suppression of human rights and unilateral complicity in genocide on the other, and the Olympics’ centrality in how all of this could be resolved, prompts attention that surely should defy simplistic charges of “China-bashing.”<sup>55</sup>

## CONCLUSION

China’s many swings between the energy and popularity of the revolutionary regime and the degradation and violence of the failed state have helped to create a popular discourse built on the tensions between the universal ideals promoted by powerful nations and the degree to which China can and should match these ideals. Modern physical culture—as a structure for direct comparison of national strength and ability—has thus become a very appropriate site for the resolving of these tensions.

The present historical moment is not one where those of us in the West can pass judgment on authoritarian regimes or boastful and fearful populations without first engaging in reflection on the state of our own culture, democracy, and commitment to world peace. That said, China—especially as a new superpower—does not lie beyond our powers of judgment as an Asian or “Third-World” exception to the obligations that all responsible people share. The events of the next few months will allow us to see if the story of Beijing 2008 will be one of defensive Chinese jingoism or of a more genuine turn to the “respect for universal fundamental ethical principles” enshrined in the Olympic charter.

## NOTES

## “How Could Anyone Respect Us?”

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